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ABSTRACT

Some of the major barriers to progress in special education reform are highlighted, and critical issues for improving the prospects of achieving equity in schooling success for all of the children in U.S. schools are discussed. Vignettes illustrate what new programs and policies for helping students might actually mean for the students and their families. One of the most significant problems in special education is the way in which students are classified and placed in special education programs, with the related problems of labeling and stereotyping. Once placement has been made, students often suffer from inescapable isolation. Achieving success in special education reform requires progress on policy, administration, and programing. A first step should be eliminating the inherent disincentives in current funding. On an administrative level, it is crucial to empower building-level administrators and staff to assemble resources they need. From a programmatic point of view, special education must be understood in terms of the whole education enterprise. The vignettes suggested for the year 2000 represent better acknowledgment of and response to student diversity and better coordination among providers of education and services. (SLD)

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Effective Student Responses to Student Diversity: Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract

This article briefly highlights some of the major barriers to progress in special education reform. It also discusses critical issues for improving the prospects of achieving equity in schooling success for all of the children in our nation's schools and provides a number of vignettes to illustrate what new programs and policies for helping all students might actually mean for the students and their families.

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EFFECTIVE SCHOOL RESPONSES TO STUDENT DIVERSITY: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

by Margaret C. Wang

This nation has a long history of commitment to the goal of building an educated citizenry. We have made great progress in ensuring equal access to a free public education for all children by stressing the value of education and seeing it as a way of achieving social and economic equity. This success can be celebrated. However, the progress we celebrate falls short of our vision of providing equity in education outcomes for all the students that schools are challenged to serve today. Many students experience serious difficulties in achieving learning success, and they need better help than they are now receiving. Providing opportunities for students to receive an education without being accountable for ensuring education outcomes simply perpetuates inequity in a more subtle form.

In discussing ways to improve the system's response to student diversity, this article (a) briefly highlights some of the major barriers to progress in special education reform, (b) discusses the critical issues that must be considered in order to improve the prospects of achieving equity in schooling success for all of the children in our nation's schools, and (c) provides a number of vignettes to illustrate what new programs and policies for helping all students might actually mean for the students and their families.

BARRIERS TO IMPROVEMENT

Despite the advances in theories and research on individual differences in learning and effective teaching, in practice this knowledge base has had very little impact on how schools respond to very different individual students. Current approaches to providing for student diversity often contribute to children's learning problems. Indeed, there is substantial evidence to suggest that students may actually receive less instruction when schools provide them with specially designated programs to meet their special learning needs (Allington & Johnston, 1986; Haynes & Jenkins, 1986). In too many cases, selecting or tracking students for instruction based on certain perceived student differences involves delivering radically different and not always appropriate content to some students; and in many "lower track" programs there is a tendency to neglect fundamental content (Oakes, 1985). A number of specific issues will now be looked at in more detail.

One of the most significant problems in the state of practice in special education today is the way students with special needs are classified and placed in special education programs. There are serious scientific and practical flaws in classifying students for special programs. For example, there is a substantial amount of evidence that most procedures for the classification of children in special programs are unreliable and invalid. The same child may be classified as handicapped by one test or diagnostician and not by another. Even a single diagnostician, working from an identical case record on two separate occasions, can offer two different diagnoses and classifications (Ysseldyke, 1987).

Furthermore, diagnostic procedures can be extremely time-consuming and costly. According to a study by Moore, Walker, and Holland (1982), it is estimated that U.S. schools spend on average $6,335 per year on each student receiving special

education services, compared with $2,686 per year for students who do not receive these services. An estimated $1,230 per child is spent on the initial appraisal and classification for entry into special education, a cost that often contributes little, if anything, to the instructional needs of students placed there. In addition, there are often transportation charges involved in getting children to their "special" classes away from their neighborhood schools. Thus, vast sums may be spent without instructional benefit to children.

Another related problem associated with some classifications is labeling and stereotyping. Children are often treated differently simply because they have been labeled. Teachers and parents may have unwarranted, lower expectations of children classified as retarded or learning disabled. Children themselves may lose confidence in how well they can do when they have been categorized and removed from regular classes. Children with special needs truly have problems, but not because they can't learn. Rather, we have a flawed service delivery system in operation. We partition ourselves for services. Not only have we categorized and separated the children, we have also separated their teachers and the college preparation programs for teachers. Repeated findings related to these issues indicate that much of the classification system for mildly handicap categories and the separateness of teacher preparation and licensing systems is unnecessary, if not harmful and wasteful (cf. Reschly, 1987, 1988).

Perhaps one of the most adverse consequences for students identified for special education services is the problem of inescapable isolation. Once students are placed in special education, they are unlikely to return to regular classrooms. For example, according to a recent report issued by the Council of the Great City Schools, only 3,516 (3.3%) of the 106,674 special education students (ages 3-21) enrolled in New York schools during the 1986-1987 school year were returned to general education placement by the end of that school year (Buttram & Kershner, 1988). Similarly dismal statistics were noted in Rochester schools (4.6%), Houston (5.5%), Los Angeles (3.9%), Philadelphia (1.9%), Chicago (8.8%), San Francisco (0.5%), and Pittsburgh (1.5%). In Washington, D.C. schools, no special education students were returned to general placement during the 1986-1987 school year.

These statistics for retention rates in special education are especially alarming in view of the significantly higher dropout rate of students in special education programs. A recently completed study commissioned by the U.S. Congress, entitled *The Education of Students with Disabilities: Where Do We Stand?* indicates a 36% dropout rate for students with disabilities, a 15% participation rate in post-secondary education programs, and a 55% unemployment rate for Americans with disabilities between the ages of 16 and 64 (National Council on Disability, 1989).

As we look to the future, the current "two systems" approach to serving students with special needs can be expected to pose increasing problems. According to the recently published *Thirteenth Annual Report to Congress*, the number of students identified with disabilities has increased every year since 1976 (Department of Education, 1991). A review of demographic data and other well-known indicators shows that the number and proportion of children with special needs will continue to rise in the coming decade. For example, of every 100 children born today, 12 are born out of wedlock, half to teenage mothers (Hodgkinson, 1985). Teenage mothers tend to have premature or low-birthweight babies, and these children often develop health and learning problems. Many of them become permanently disabled, needing a lifetime of medical care and supportive services (Hughes, Johnson, Rosenbaum, Simons, & Butler, 1987).

DIRECTIONS FOR SYSTEM-WIDE IMPROVEMENT

Achieving success in special education reform requires progress on several fronts: policy, administration, and programming. On the policy front, the first move should be the elimination of the inherent disincentives in current funding policies. These disincentives are based in the

separation of funding into "special education" and "comprehensive education" categories. Such policies have thwarted attempts by local districts and schools to employ research-based innovative practices to improve student learning outcomes. Special education funding must be linked to a full continuum of services that can be delivered as an integral component of a comprehensive program of regular education that includes supportive aids and preventive services for all children who require them. Recent developments in federal and state policy guidelines such as Chapter 1 school-wide projects and the inclusion of pre-referral intervention as "Fundable" special education services are steps in the right direction for improving current practice.

Administratively, it is crucial to empower building-level administrators and staff to assemble all resources necessary for the delivery of coordinated educational services in regular school settings for all students who need them. Productive linkages must be established between classroom instructional staff and school-based and district-based specialists (e.g., special education and Chapter 1 teachers, speech therapists, school psychologists, guidance counselors). A variety of changes in functions and roles among the staff need to occur. Regular education teachers at all school levels and in all curriculum areas need to become more knowledgeable and confident in their ability to teach students with special needs. They will not replace special education teachers or other specialized professionals; rather, the two groups will work closely together to identify, plan, guide, instruct, and evaluate the progress of individual students with special needs.

Programmatically, special education must be understood in terms of the whole education enterprise. All students, including and especially students with special needs, require an educationally powerful regular education system that includes "special" intervention programs as an integral part of a comprehensive system. Special education and related services are provided in regular classes; specialized settings are used only when essential and for limited periods of time.

One way of resolving some of the serious implementation problems of the "second system" approach is to adopt a "shared responsibility" approach that not only calls for the coordination of education and related services, but also a new partnership involving the coordinated efforts of federal, state and local education agencies. Such efforts should be aimed at establishing policies that support and encourage integrated forms of education for students with special needs, who currently are segregated for services in separate special, remedial, and compensatory education programs.

LOOKING AHEAD

What Education Might Look Like in a New, Comprehensive System

The following Year 2000 Vignettes provide a scenario for what I believe can be achieved for children with special needs, given what we currently know about improving instruction and learning in schools. The vignettes are not predictions, but suggested programmatic changes that might be helpful to a large number of students who are currently not well served even with the extraordinary level of support they receive in such second systems programs as special education and Chapter I. (Some of these vignettes are taken from the final chapter of a recent publication on special education research and practice by Wang, Reynolds, & Walberg, 1990).

Year 2000 Vignette -- Application of Effective Instructional Principles

Students with special needs now benefit from school applications of emerging principles for effective educational practices. These are based on the research and innovative school practices of the past several decades. Most of these practices are hardly new; they represent, in many instances, traditional -- and even ancient -- wisdom about effective education. The practices that have important implications for the effectiveness of learning for both regular and special needs students include: time spent in

learning; parental involvement in the learning process; suitability of instruction; and constructive classroom and school climates.

Some programs and practices, nonetheless, are especially appropriate for children who fall behind their peers. These programs have one or more of the following features: instruction based on student achievement needs, as well as materials and procedures that allow students to proceed at their own pace; frequent assessments of progress; additional time for students who need it; increased student responsibility for monitoring and guiding one's own learning; and mutual help and cooperation among students in achieving learning goals.

Year 2000 Vignette -- Teams of Educators

An increasing number of special education teachers now work directly with teams of teachers in various kinds of regular instructional environments. Many special educators have helped to lead the restructuring of schools and now serve in roles that are well-integrated into mainstream school operations.

Mainstream programs are now diverse and have departed from the one teacher/one class operations of the past. In general, special education teachers provide high-density instruction (in small groups or one-on-one teaching situations as part of the regular class operation) to students showing the least progress. They also help to modify programs for those who learn most rapidly. They spend the majority of their time evaluating pupils, reporting to and collaborating with parents, and managing special assistance for children who show special problems. Special education teachers work in full collaboration with other teachers in teams at elementary, secondary, vocational-technical, and higher education levels.

Year 2000 Vignette -- Child Study and Classification

Studies of children with special needs now focus mainly on the necessary modification of instructional programs. Children are not labeled; rather, the labels are attached to programs. It is common, for example, for selected children at the primary-grade level to receive extended and intensive reading instruction. Others receive extended instruction in social and friendship skills. Children with poor vision are taught to read by Braille methods. Classification is strictly in terms of instructional needs; therefore, such classifications may be relevant for only a brief time.

Year 2000 Vignette -- Monitoring of Marginal Pupils

Schools now regularly use a procedure to monitor the progress of pupils showing the most and least progress in school learning. This involves a review of every student whose rate of progress toward important school learning goals is especially low or high. Monitoring helps answer such questions as What are the characteristics of these students? What programs appear to serve them well, and what could be improved? Through such analyses, every child who shows learning problems is identified and studied. The procedure begins not by classifying and labeling the child in traditional special education style, but by identifying students in terms reflecting their progress toward important school goals and objectives. Procedures are similar for high-achieving students, on the assumption that they, too, need adapted school programs to permit them to proceed at high rates in school learning.

Year 2000 Vignette -- Providing for Student Diversity

Students formerly thought to be learning disabled are now progressing in regular classrooms, thanks to special tutoring through computer hookups at home and school. At a one-time cost of $350, a home terminal and modem allows each child to be tutored by a sophisticated computer in the afternoons, evenings, and summers. The tutoring program allows parents, teachers, and students to estimate progress in learning in any school subject in less than eight minutes of testing time. The results can trigger automated tutoring in any area of weakness or special interest. While it is possible to do much schoolwork at home, the majority of students

prefer to do most of their work in school because of the desired companionship of classmates and teachers.

Year 2000 Vignette -- Coordinated Teacher Preparation

The School of Education at the State University has disbanded separate programs for preparation of teachers of learning disabled children and now offers an enriched general program for teachers of basic literacy skills. University students who prepare for general teaching are enabled to take courses which expand their resourcefulness as teachers of reading and arithmetic. Most trainees in the combined program are expected to be employed in regular classroom teaching; others will join teams as specialized teachers and work to extend and enrich programs for students who need more help than usual in learning to read or to acquire other basic skills.

Year 2000 Vignette -- School Coordination with Welfare and Health and Human Services Agencies

The Star School has made progress in coordinating all of its internal programs, such as the separate special education, Chapter 1, and migrant education programs. Now it is also deeply involved in linking its program with those of the county's Departments of Children's Services, Health and Human Services, and Social Welfare. Agreements between the school and county agencies have been reached to cover the exchange of information and to create common service eligibility requirements. The county now places several of its professional workers at the school site to provide family and mental health services and to coordinate welfare services for all families served by the school. County and state officials have granted necessary waivers to facilitate a coherent pattern of services both within the school and in the broader community. A carefully developed plan for evaluation of the program is under way.

Year 2000 Vignette -- Coordination of Government Offices and Programs

Federal officials heading categorical programs meet regularly to plan for improved coordination of programs and to consider requests from states for waivers to permit state and local coordination of programs at the school level. This results in more coherent programs in the schools to serve all students, including those whose situation in the schools is marginal in various ways -- and without financial disincentives. Members of Congress are updated on emerging efforts for better coordination of programs and express readiness to support enabling legislation to provide for more coherent programs for students with special needs and their families.

CONCLUSION

This article summarizes some of the general problems and prospects for the improvement of school programs for marginal students. The views proposed emerge from a broad review of research and the practical wisdom of professionals from the field. But much remains to be investigated, understood, and improved. Indeed, we will never know in any final sense what forms of instruction are most appropriate for each child. It is appropriate, nevertheless, to note where gaps in knowledge exist, where services are less than optimal, and where programs are disjointed and inefficient. We can then move on to still better inquiries and programmatic improvements based on what we know that works. The challenge is to continue to improve current practice using the best of what we currently know. A particularly acute problem at this time is to improve the coordination of programs, both in the schools and in the broader community, that serve students who are exceptional or marginal in their school progress.

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The Temple University Center for Research in Human Development and Education is an interdisciplinary center for the study of emerging problems and challenges facing children, youth, and families. Its overall goal is to investigate the basic forces that affect human development as well as educational processes and outcomes. An important focus of the Center's work is the identification and shaping of effective responses to these forces through far-reaching changes in institutional policies and practices.

The problems and challenges facing children, youth, and families stem from a variety of cultural, economic, political, and health pressures. Their solutions are, by nature, complex. They require long-term programs of study that apply knowledge and expertise from many disciplines and professions. To this end, the Center draws together the many resources of the University and a wide range of national, state, and regional programs. The result is interdisciplinary and interdepartmental collaborations that involve investigations of social, economic, educational, and developmental factors and demonstration of state-of-the-art models for training and for delivery of relevant services. Research and development projects in these areas reflect a commitment to enhance the knowledge base for improving the quality of life for children and families, particularly in urban environments.

The work of the Center for Research in Human Development and Education is divided into four program units: Improving Instruction and Learning in Schools, which provides technical assistance and training for innovative school programs; Social Service Delivery Systems, which develops models for effective social service delivery; Studies of Child Development and Early Intervention, which conducts pre-school diagnosis and produces innovative program development; and the National Center on Education in the Inner Cities (CEIC), funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement, which has undertaken a program of research and development as well as dissemination that takes bold steps to mobilize and strengthen education and related resources to foster resilience and learning success of children, youth, and their families in inner cities.

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